

An interview about Simon Hantaï between Mick Finch and Éric de Chassey

Abstract

This is a transcript of an interview between Mick Finch and Éric de Chassey about the Simon Hantaï exhibition de Chassey curated at the Villa Médici in Rome between the 12th February to 11th May, 2014. De Chassey is Professor of Art History at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Lyons and has, since 2009, been the Director of the French Academy in Rome, the Villa Medici. The Villa Medici exhibition took place after the major Hantaï exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 2014 for which, de Chassey had contributed a catalogue essay on Hantaï's silkscreen work. The interview discusses the context of the Villa Medici exhibition and particularly the way Hantaï's latter years were represented. The interview took place at the Villa Medici on Sunday 11th May 2014.

Keywords

Simon Hantaï
Eric de Chassey
pliage
Inframince
painting
silkscreen

MF: The first question I want to ask is how you positioned the Hantaï exhibition here at the Villa Medici. I noticed in the catalogue text (Chassey: 2014) that you talk about two specificities: *écriture* (*writing*) and *les petites touches* (*small touches*). The exhibition begins with how the surrealist work arrived at a point where these specificities are clearly present with *L'Écriture Rose* (1958 – 59), and *À Galla Placidia* (1958 – 59). Then we have the *Mariales* (1960 – 1962) series. The thing that struck me is what happens in the final room of the exhibition. I'm thinking in terms of the essay you wrote for the Pompidou exhibition (Chassey: 2013 245-253), in relation to the silkscreen work, where there's a sense of recapitulation of all of Hantaï's former positions and that somehow something else is going on. It seems to have something to do with the relation between the autographic and the reprographic. I think the question I'm trying to get to here is that this relationship seems to bring another

perspective to Hantaï. Is that how you were, in some ways, thinking about the exhibition?

EdC: I had the feeling that the Pompidou exhibition was showing Hantaï as a great painter, but as a great painter because he was a great painter, not because he didn't want to be a great painter. I think he's a great painter because he didn't want to be a great painter. And that's really what strikes me in the work. So I'm not saying that the Pompidou exhibition was wrong. I'm just saying it was presenting another version and I really wanted to focus on something a little bit different. They're not mutually exclusive, but they have to do with different things. So that's why I think that the whole question, that's behind any of the works by Hantaï that I'm showing, is the question of how to get rid of the author basically, and that's why I'm starting in the years 1958-59, because that's the first time when this question is really at the centre of his practice. And you can see that between 1958 and 1960, so very, very quickly, he tries several ways to get rid of the author and not just because of any structuralist question; I think it's more to do with the fact that he thinks the author is not important enough. So that's why it could be interpreted, at the time, in a very reactionary way. To get rid of it he tries different solutions, finding in 1960 the *pliage* (*folding*) as a solution. Then I would say the exhibition shows that at one point in the early 1980s he realises that it's not enough, that to get rid of the author you do have to get rid of the author completely, and at one point you have to get rid of painting and objects. So that's why he stops painting. And then there's something I would say where, nevertheless, being still attached to art and maybe more specifically to painting, in the 1990s he finds a way to come back to painting without having to fall back into what he feels were traps, that there is a will to recapitulate both, I mean, very literally he has lost the *Tabulas lilas* (Tabulas from 1982 that were white on white and whose exposure to light colored them with a lilac hue, although there was no such color painted on the canvas), because the very fact of showing them has destroyed them, so he wants to find another way to see them and he uses photography as a way to do that. I'm not sure that these paintings on aluminium he made through these photographs of older works, that we're showing here, that were also shown at Galerie Jean Fournier, are really great works. But in some ways it's not my question. I do think these are experiments that have to be taken into account. So he's using photography as a way to go back to older works, to recapitulate them and transform them into something else, by distancing them as much as possible and then getting back to writing but using it in quite a different way than it was in 1958 (in *Peinture-Écriture rose*) because of what he went through during years in between. And somehow I do think the *Pliages à usage domestique* (1990) are his ultimate works: they are both a way to recapitulate and a way to go somewhere else, especially for someone who has always been worried that beauty will take over, that it will only be about spectacle and about producing beauty and knowing where you are going. He did these *pliages* only with dust. What he was

doing, was basically to use what is normally used to do housekeeping (a dust cloth) so they do not use paint - maybe there's some traces of paint on some of them, but that's because they've been used to clean the floor where there was some paint. Most of these works, especially the small one which is not framed, on canvas, it is only dust, there is no paint. The grey colour that you see is just dust. I would say that if you think in terms of history, Hantaï is really working after Matisse and Pollock, but he is also working after Duchamp and the Paris exhibition was basically eliding that aspect. Here I do emphasise this aspect, especially in the last room, which I wanted to come as a surprise but also as a summary of the rest of the exhibition, where one wall is mixing works from the early 1950s and late works that have to do with Duchamp. So if you do a painting with only dust it replaces paint and I showed this kind of late work side by side with an early painting titled *Duchamp efface* (1951-1960), while the rest of the show was pretty much chronological.

MF: I felt with the observations you're making in the Pompidou catalogue, and I think it's really strong also in this exhibition, is the sense that from the *Mariales* on, with the pliages and the movement from 2D to 3D, there's a sense of making something that's almost like a monochrome. There's been so many discussions about what the type of mark is in relation to the *pliage* and I think what the last room in the exhibition seems to address is something quite different. He seemed to be interested in, to use a Duchampian term, something like the *inframince* (infra thin)?

EdC: Yes.

MF: Which is not something I've ever thought about with Hantaï. It's not a discussion that has previously been developed around Hantaï, unless I'm mistaken?

EdC: There's something of that kind, which is nearly *inframince* in the 1974 film which was showing at the entrance to the exhibition, I mean the shorter film made for television, not the full length one by Meurice (Meurice: 1977), where Hantaï says that anyone could do the same. But then he has a small hesitation in his French and he says, he doesn't say 'en principe' (*in principle*) but he says something like that, I mean it's very close to 'en principe'. And this 'en principe' is this *inframince* difference – between anyone could do it, and in fact it's done in such a way that only I can do it. At the same time what I think he meant is that it matters that anyone could do it. But that the main condition is that you take as much hard labour, boring labour, that is needed, and that no one has anymore, this ability. This is why he speaks, with Jean-Luc Nancy, about the way the streets of his youth in Hungary, during festivals and feasts, were paved with flowers. Which meant that you were working for several days, picking flowers and then arranging them, which would only last for five minutes because they would be trampled by the people in the procession. It could be viewed in a very materialistic sense, but showing Hantaï in Rome, you understand that it's also linked with a certain catholic mysticism, or something like that, which I think is very strong in the work, even though I don't

know where exactly to place it. But, before returning to the question of the *inframince*, I would like to say that Hantaï's work is also a reading of Pollock and Matisse, that is in the way that he sees their work. He's close to Mathieu (the painter Georges Mathieu) in 1955-'57, whose reading of Pollock is about the 'masterful virile heroic gesture'. Hantaï's reading of Pollock is about scribbling, a kind of all over thing but which is done with just line, and line being united with colour, his writing being in colour, that's what it's also about, so nearly the opposite. It has more to do with early Twombly, or something like that. And then he encountered Matisse and it's about the same thing. When Matisse says 'la peinture doit être comme un bon fauteuil' (*painting must be like a good armchair*) or when he speaks about the decorative, well we do have a tendency to apologise for painting, about this 'bad dream of modernism', which would be 'decoration', in the words of T J Clark. We say, oh okay, it's decoration-plus; it's not decoration as everybody understands it, it's 'le décoratif', 'the decorative'; it's something at a higher level. And in fact I more and more think, that's what Matisse was thinking, and I think that's what Hantaï saw, is that it's not a jump, there's no jump in level, there's no switch of level in that, it's just that it's decoration as anyone views it – just as a beautiful carpet to have in your room. There's no difference in nature between a decorative picture and a decorative carpet. It's just this tiny bit of difference that makes it specific and autonomous at the same time, and it's a thing I tried to show in the exhibition in the rooms with the *Tabulas* by choosing, very explicitly and for this precise reason, the sizes of paintings. I wanted paintings that would take up an entire wall and be as close to the dimensions of the wall as possible, so they could be manipulable, but at the same time have a ten-centimetre frame around them. I also chose a red and yellow painting to be side by side, because I knew they would clash completely, I knew there would be something happening there also.

MF: That's very different than in the Pompidou exhibition?

EdC: So it's *inframince*, but not only in the Duchampian sense. There would be a Pollockian, a Matissian and Duchampian *inframince* at the same time. All this together and something which is pretty much Hantaï and which really interests me in the silkscreen works, and also in the later works, which is the fact I'm taking into account - the question of photography, the question of reproduction, the question of, multiple works, all these aspects. They were really repressed in the Pompidou exhibition. When you think that for instance the Pompidou, the Musée national d'art moderne, owns the three large silkscreens from 1995 and they didn't show them! And they own small works and wouldn't want to show them, because they only wanted large-size paintings, 'peintures à l'américaine' so to speak.

MF: I find this fascinating because when I lived in France, I had a great admiration for Hantaï, but until your catalogue essay I'd never thought about this. I saw the Fresnoy exhibition (the group exhibition, *Fables du lieu*, Tourcoing, Le Fresnoy, Studio

national des arts contemporains, 10th February – 1st April 2001, curated by Georges Didi-Huberman), where the digital prints were shown, and thinking that they were really interesting, but not actually being able to really understand them that well. What I feel with what you're doing here is a number of things. I'd quite like to come back to the *Laissées* later. But can we keep going on with the *inframince*? Not just the *inframince* aspect, what it seems to be opening up is a much more complex Hantaï, even through the 1960s, because, as you're saying, even then he's making silkscreen work. This is when silkscreen is a very young process and obviously Warhol is using it. I think there's a comment somewhere that he's not wanting to make a tableau through the means of silkscreen; that there's something very different going on. The thing I want to bring in here is his own contemporaries. Because what comes to mind immediately is that I was looking at a photograph of an affiche (*a poster*) for the Pompidou show that was in the Paris Metro, so the grid replicates (the poster was a detail from a *tabula* painting and the posters were pasted in a line, creating a grid), and I was thinking of Buren, obviously he had a very close relationship with Buren. It brought back to me the memory of the exhibition at the Pompidou after Parmentier's death, where Parmentier and Hantaï were shown together (*Simon Hantaï / Michel Parmentier*, from the collections of the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art modern, Paris, 17 January-19 March 2001). The questions it seems to throw up is Hantaï obviously knew these artists very well. There's a kind of documented relationship to Parmentier I'm aware of. But what I'd never been aware of is that there seems to be an articulation of some of the problematics, associated with these artists present in Hantaï's own practice. Like, social space and also a political dimension. One could push it towards a sort of a democratisation of the work, but it also seems to align more with this *pauvreté* (*poverty*), the modesty of the work, all of those things which seem to be his reason for later stopping painting. They would be too beautiful, too consumable, the art market being the problem etc. But it's, I'm not getting to the question here, what I'm asking is that, in a way you're presenting a Hantaï who's maybe got an eye on pop art, Warhol for example and that seems reasonable. But in a way you're also bringing Buren and Parmentier back into the frame, in a way that I'm not sure that the Hantaï/Parmentier, Pompidou exhibition really did?

EdC: They weren't brought together because they were completely separate in the space if I remember correctly. I do think there's a strong relationship with that. At the same time it's coming from an old world, I would say, this kind of Hungarian, Swab, Catholic, link with Judaism, tradition, is very very important. Whereas I think it is present in Parmentier but not that much in Buren. It's the fact that you have to deal with the entire tradition and what's behind the tradition, therefore religion, theology, philosophy, social practices, and also the history of art. So there are very specific things, for example Byzantine mosaics, Giotto, Piero, Tintoretto, Cezanne, Matisse, Pollock. What makes Hantaï for me a really major artist, is that he doesn't

throw the baby out with the bath water. I mean he's always trying to solve contradictions by being in the middle of the contradiction. And I don't mean necessarily him personally, I mean through his work. Because I think it's really in the work that you see it, if you show it in a particular way. It's actually what struck me, and it's why I started with these works in this exhibition as well, with the first wall of the exhibition at the Pompidou which was this confrontation of the 1959 work (*Peinture*, 1959), and the 1973 work (*Tabula*, 1973), which I re-played here literally. When I saw this wall, it gave me an idea of what the show was going to be, and then it turned out to be a little different. But I see this in retrospect, I didn't know this at the time. It was basically, okay, if we start with confronting these two works, then there's another way of showing why they're confronted in the way I'm going to show them. And that's basically what I tried to do.

MF: So that's with an alarm clock painting – is it an alarm clock painting ('Alarm clock' is a short hand for *Peinture*, 1959 as its marks were made with the bell from an alarm clock)?

EdC: Yes an alarm clock painting and a *Tabula* next to each other. I was at the entrance of the exhibition at the Pompidou, wondering why they chose these two works. They do make sense, I mean for me they're very immediate. Then I thought okay, they are doing that because what they are going to emphasise is getting rid of the author and showing how painting makes itself, creates itself, and then I didn't find this exactly in the exhibition. I was buried in the narrative of the exhibition and at the same time missing something, so I decided that the only way to know if I was right was basically to do an exhibition myself.

MF: You made the decision to do this exhibition after visiting the Pompidou show?

EdC: Yes, the decision really was made at the last minute. I visited the Hantaï show in Paris only in its last week. I hadn't found time to come before, I was coming back from the USA, getting off the plane, going directly from the airport to the museum, I had another thing to do in Rome at the end of the day so I just had this slot free. I saw the exhibition, was actively amazed, and didn't sleep for the whole night. I was jet-lagged and I was thinking what can I do - I need to do something. Then the day after I phoned Alfred (*Pacquement*) and said: 'Is there still time to bring over the exhibition? because I can move things in my programme a little bit in Rome and maybe I can find time to do it in March'.

MF: So it was a direct response to seeing the Paris show?

EdC: Yes.

MF: Interesting. You are someone who knows Hantaï's work really well.

EdC: Yes that's exactly the way it happened. I said oh I want to do it and then I said to Alfred, Dominique and Isabelle (*the three curators of the Paris exhibition - Alfred*

Pacquement, Dominique Fourcade and Isabelle Monod-Fontaine), who are friends: 'I want to do it. Can we speak about it?' And their answer was yes and I said: 'okay, can we make a selection from the exhibition in Paris?' And they said that I should do it on my own. They said: 'We would much more prefer to see your point of view than ours transformed and adapted to Rome', which was very generous.

MF: I am fascinated with this collection of perspectives, lots of things are coming to light and a much more complex Hantaï is emerging. And I imagine there's possibly more to come?

EdC: There's many more complexities, I mean the chronology we have is in fact oversimplified. Because a lot of the series' are overlapping. The cut to the pliage is not completely accurate...

MF: What in something like the *Mariales* you mean?

EdC: I mean at the time of the *Mariales* and even at the time of the *Catamurons* (1963 – 1965) he was still doing some works with the petite touches

MF: Okay.

EdC: And you see some of them on the market, dated 1963, 1964...

MF: Oh really.

EdC: So it means that both types of work were asking the same questions, I mean Hantaï could go on doing the two at the same time. Of course the answers are very different and very clear-cut so it's difficult to show them together. The whole question of what's happening in the last 25 years, from maybe 1982 to 2008, is still very open. Because for example I didn't know, and I don't know who knew, that there were some actual artworks that were made, I mean in the books with Derrida, and Nancy. There were these photographs and prints that show that some work had been made with writing and *pliage* at the same time, but no one knew exactly that these works were actually works. I mean I just thought that they were props to the photographs and that was it. But they are framed, and they are preserved and they were given by Hantaï himself, and so...

MF: ... they became incorporated into the body of work?

EdC: I mean it's the first time they were shown. I don't really know how to assess them, I still don't know how many of them there are. As you know, there's a whole Hantaï Archive now functioning and Anna (Hantaï, the artists's daughter) is really working on all that. The whole body of writing he was doing over the whole period of time - I mean I don't know what's in there and I don't know what it is. If it's only re-writing or actual artworks. I do think about the last period and that's why I really wanted to include the books in the exhibition itself, and not in a Beaubourg (*the Centre Pompidou*) kind of annex space to the exhibition, as a fact that you could see. I mean

there's something that's not that different to correspondence going on in these works, in the sense that I think that for instance the *Hbl* (2004) or the *Suairé* (2001) are as much a discussion, through work, with Georges Didi-Huberman than works that would be completely autonomous. I don't know what their function is. For example, the silkscreens on canvas from 1995 and later, these works need to be more researched. They're as much a way to reply in a conversation than something that's done on its own terms. And maybe if you look back, I'm pretty sure that you could see a large part of his work like that. The 1958 works would be really a way to take part in a dialogue with surrealism, in a very literal way. It is addressed to a certain person or a certain group of persons at one time. Instead of replying with words, if you take seriously this idea that painting is thought, then it means that you're thinking in painting, not with painting, I don't know how to say it... but...

MF: How would you say it in French?

EdC: I don't know.

MF: The same problem?

EdC: Yes we have the same problem, *pense-peint*, *peint-pense*, something like that, I don't know – I mean the two are not separated. It also means that the way of envisioning painting as a work is very specific and I don't see that many artists about whom you can say this. If you want to use this perspective of history in general you can find various ways to express this. And I'm not speaking about the formalist kind of answer, a type of organisation in the sense that one painter would raise a question, I mean the Friedian (*Michael Fried*) point of view. I think it's much more complex than that.

MF: Staying with this engagement he had with, for want of a better phrase, printed media. One of the things you raise at one point and I think it's very evident in the Rome show, and it's also very evident in your essay for the Pompidou catalogue, is how in Hantaï's painting the aveuglement process (*working blind*) operates. As a kind of auto-composition, starting with white, folding, putting a colour down, unfolding within the figure/ground relationship. With the photographic and later also with the digital scans, there seems to be another type of distancing that happens, a 'retraite' (*a stepping back from*), from painting. It seems that there's a sense of how process works in possibly an Anglo-Saxon context. In a sense, pulling an understanding, or a thinking through that is positive, like print. It's making me think about another relationship to Hantaï, the way that the French have understood Hantaï as an engagement that relates very strongly to that structuralist relationship to painting that happened from the 1960s, for example the groups like BMPT, Supports/Surfaces and various other artists. But it seems to me this reprographic aspect is creating another distancing. There is something else that seems to be going on. I'm wondering if this is just a sense of authorship? It seems to move Hantaï's

conversation closer to America. I'm thinking of someone like Ellsworth Kelly in this context - or somebody like that. I'm not sure there is a relationship between them. But it's something I want to associate more with a different culture of painting. Again it seems to me that you know Hantaï matches perfectly with that French post-war, let's call it pictorial engagement, painting yes but it seems to be much more than painting. Or it's painting in a very particular way? But it's also seems to be an opening out into something else. I'm wondering, that at this fascinating moment with this interest around Hantaï outside of France, if a non-French audience is seeing another Hantaï without having to be nudged there? I think the question I'm asking here is to do with that relationship of Hantaï to the French context. I'm thinking of (*the French artist*) François Rouan who knew Hantaï very well. They showed together. There's a really obvious relationship of Hantaï to François in some major respects, to *pliage*, *tressage*, but also the way François would want to talk about Hantaï in terms of the body?

EdC: Which to me was one of the reasons why it was crucial to show small scale paintings, small size paintings, like the *Panses*. I do like a lot the large *Panses*, but when you show the small ones, the ones that I showed, they're so obviously dealing with bodily experiences. And I find it interesting. I'm also thinking about these contradictions, for instance, when I say that Hantaï wants to get rid of the author and everything, and he wants to distance himself, and he uses means that normally should enable him to distance himself. So no longer painting, controlling his hand and everything. But then he's crouching he's never been as close to the painting. It's even closer! You know that (*the French artist Claude*) Viallat says that when he was reading about Pollock, he thought that Pollock was walking on paintings. But what Hantaï is doing is really crawling on his paintings, in a way that someone more like (*the Japanese artist Kazuo*) Shiraga would do in the fifties, but there is almost no one else. Then there's distancing, and the fact that there's almost no trace of the painter's hand, but then, when you see the film of him working, you see him basically inhabiting the painting. I don't see any closer relationship to painting than this kind of thing. I do think that the *Panses* are coming from that kind of experience. The relationship with American art and this idea of how to deal with reproduction, maybe I would say, it's not an antagonising position between France and America. It might stem from a related idea, that is how to have an art practice that would be truly democratic. I think this is something that connects him with someone like Kelly. Because I think that one of the similar issues that their works both raise is to do with the will to annihilate any kind of hierarchy between the artist at work and the viewer, to say that there's no supremacy of the author as being a higher person. The painting should not dominate the viewer, it should be at the same level. That's where the *inframince* comes in, but it's not quite what I'm saying. I always have a problem with the *inframince* in the Duchampian sense of the word. I'm much more interested in *inframince* in what I

would call a Matissian *inframince*, which is this idea that is really democratic basically and it's also where I'm connecting Kelly to Matisse.

MF: In the sense of the tiny almost imperceptible difference between something, a decorative carpet and a painting for example? They both share that condition?

EdC: Yes. So you never feel dominated by the work. And also you know how it's made, there's no secret. Of course it's a general question of the 1960s and one way to answer it would be Buren's way, and Kelly would be another one I think. Obviously I'm much more interested by Kelly's way than by Buren's. I do think that there is a contradiction here between being at this level, there being no hierarchy and still maintaining some content. What bores me with Buren is that it's only about the context.

MF: There's an enormous conversation here that I'm not sure we're going to have time for. But it does fascinate me. There's a number of things, even with what you are saying about the difference between the Matissian and Duchampian *inframinces*. It brings to mind something I had...

EdC: Thanks for the idea, because I've never had it, now I'm going to use it – Matisse's *inframince*; it's only because of our conversation that I've thought about it.

MF: Hantaï is Hungarian, he arrives in France in 1948, I don't know what his French was like when he arrived there, I don't know how long it took for him to get up to speed in French. But there was another aspect in the final room. It says in the grand narrative, of the Rome exhibition's catalogue, that there is the Pollock/Matissian relationship, but that's been the grand axis of how to understand Hantaï for some time now. The final room begins to put Duchamp and Matisse together. I remember somebody saying to me that the French understand Modernism as either a relationship to Duchamp or to Matisse. Is that anything you've ever come across?

EdC: No.

MF: Well, it kind of makes sense.

EdC: Yes.

MF: It makes tremendous sense. The fact they're related literally in family terms is really interesting. But to make this link is interesting in viewing Modernism not along a Picasso-Duchamp axis but rather as Matisse-Duchamp. And I don't think it's a nationalistic thing, it does make sense in terms of something that I think Hantaï must have imbued at a certain point. The thing I remember from being in France, when I got to know certain artists, was the ability for a French artist to be able to talk with extraordinary precision from one concept to a movement, one material moving from one space to another, as an operation. This extraordinary dexterity of language that displaces into the way a painter works. And I get the feeling with Hantaï, that he's possibly speculating, in his conversations with Didi-Huberman, with Derrida, and

Nancy, along such lines. Then again there's another interrogation – in terms of his reading of Bataille, Heidegger and Nietzsche? I'm not absolutely sure if he was reading Nietzsche?

EdC: I know he was.

MF: There seems to be a question here of translation. I don't mean just language-translation, more translation of concepts. We have already talked about the carpets of flowers that he talks about in the film, when he's laying out his paintings on the lawn of his house, and he's talking about when he was young, and the religious festivals he remembers in Hungary. I believe you met Hantaï...

EdC: Yes. Quite a lot. I was seeing him a lot in 1995-97 and then I stopped.

MF: Did he still feel like a non-French artist, what was the fluidity like in conversation?

EdC: It was fluid, the French, I mean his use of French was not completely fluid, making a lot of grammatical errors, and using words that were not always clear, but then not switching to Hungarian though.

MF: You couldn't do that though.

EdC: His French would switch into German terms when he started talking about philosophy.

MF: He spoke German?

EdC: I suppose so, as he was *Schwäbisch*. You know in Hungary this part of it was actually German speaking. And his real name, I think only his father became known as Hantaï, although the family name was not Hantaï, it was a German name (*His father's name was originally Handl*).

MF: So when he was reading Heidegger and Nietzsche he was perhaps reading it in German?

EdC: In German, I think (subsequent conversations with Hantaï's son Daniel have thrown doubt on whether Hantaï was in fact reading in German but it is certain that he was close to the language).

MF: That's interesting.

EdC: And this means that the conversations he had with Deleuze, Derrida and Nancy were about what he was reading in German. The question of translation, yes it is very important in the work. I didn't really think about it before. I only thought about it because I was doing the exhibition here in Italy. As you know he left Hungary not for Paris directly. He went first to Italy for a while, travelling by foot through Italy to come to Rome, and then he took a train to Paris. The question of language and translation is really everywhere I would say, because of the way in which Hantaï is Modernist, but also how he maintains the questions of how to make viable paintings

that would have the same level as the wider tradition, I mean in relation to the great paintings that he would have admired, like Piero for example. But not, and this is very un-modernist, not in the sense of emulating their visual quality, their specific quality, but more how he could raise as many questions as such works, or something like that. So it does mean translating things...

MF: So in a way, I might be pushing this too far, but what I was thinking with the printed aspect, the photo to silkscreen, and then the digital scan to digital print works, they are obviously transcriptions, iterations, kind of like translations in a way, because one of the other things that is going on, is the sense of the figure/ground, in the way the paintings are made, and the way the figure/ground is articulated in the silkscreen works. I don't know if translation is the right word to use. But if a distancing happens, what happens in that stepping back? It seems to me that this is a question the later period seems to be addressing? It's not a simple issue of a kind of strategy of auto-composition, to get rid of the author, it seems to address something else?

EdC: I'm saying in getting rid of the author I really mean something that's much more complex than the Barthesian reading of the death of the author, it's more a death of the author in the sense of Master Eckhardt, like a negative theology is going through the death of God to find God. , It's '*négation de la négation*'.

MF: Double negative?

EdC: Yes and the silkscreens I think are experiments with the idea of if you get rid of something then do you find another thing? And what you find is in one way the fact that it becomes usable. In a time of consumers, a consumerist society, how do you make objects that have no value, so that they can be of use to anyone? At the same time the paintings are flat, and the fact that they were once folded makes for a very small relief, which is very interesting. You lose that completely in the silkscreens, but what you gain is this reversal of the figure/ground that means that you still have a space which is not assignable. You do lose ground - or something like that. I think that in this way he compensates what he's losing with something else...

MF: ... it pushes it closer to *écriture* in a way, with the relation to the white page? The digital aspect seems to me to be interesting. What you've just said is actually true, the photograph, the silkscreen, you just get the flat figure/ground but with the digital works those relief aspects return, don't they?

EdC: Yes completely. But at the same time, what I feel about them, is that they are incredibly, and this is the case with the dust paintings, they are incredibly melancholy, I mean because they are about losing something, or that something is irremediably lost.

MF: They are like ghosts?

- EdC: They are like ghosts yes. And this aspect is where they are very un-American. They are very, very European. It's not an optimistic starting anew, or something like that, it is more: how do we deal with ghosts? It's the only thing we have left. How do we proceed with them? How do we still try to do something with them that would be useful?
- MF: In this context could you tell me a little bit about the *Laissées* you hung in the exhibition as they are really important in relation to what you've just said (the *Laissées* were made, approximately, between 1981 and 1994. They were principally a product of cutting and reframing sections from gigantic *tabula* paintings made for an exhibition at Capc in Bordeaux in 1981)?
- EdC: That's interesting because at one point I knew I wanted the *Laissées* to be going side by side with the *Tabulas*, also because I think for instance the green *Tabula* painting which is dated on the canvas 1980, is not a 'classic' *Tabula*; it's obviously cut from a larger work. I'm also, through this, raising the question of knowing when he actually started to edit his own work by cutting, as I was so sure the *Laissée* was a process started later, after when he had abandoned painting. Or was he already trying to work like that before? So that's the way I wanted the *Laissées* to appear, and extrude for instance the large black one and the smaller blue that are quite extraordinary in terms of their visual qualities. There's a contradiction also in the *Laissées*. Okay they are dejections of paintings. But they could also be taken as an incredible refinement of painting, you choose. Somehow I was thinking, there's this habit in French, in European and in general academic painting, where you have the art critic saying – oh, that painting is not that good, but if you take one tiny bit of it, it's actually very well done. With students you find in the academy – oh, you should go for that small part, type of attitude. I don't know but I think it's out of fashion to think that way now, but it was a way to judge painting and I'm just wondering whether the *Laissées* are not also that kind of thing. Instead of being an impoverishment, something that's even more refined. Hantai would have thought: 'Okay I have a seven by nine metres painting. It's working like that but then if I cut the right part and frame it so that it works, of course it's even better.' Of course framing has to do with photography also, it is choosing something in an object that you find interesting, just like you focus and frame with the camera, it's very linked to that. At first I must say, I was planning in the last room to show only works that had to do with reproduction, and then writing, and also the dust painting, and not to show any *Laissées*. I did the installation and I was left with this small purple painting, this small square *Laissée*. I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't want to put it in the last room because I thought that the *Laissées* had nothing to do with that period. I didn't know what to do with it. Finally, we were working on the catalogue at the same time as doing the installation, because there was a very tight deadline. Then the graphic designer proposed this layout and then I said, oh, okay, in fact it does

have some relationship. I installed them side-by-side and I suddenly realised that the questions that are raised by the *Laissées*, and also by the silkscreens are questions of reproduction, reproduction through re-framing itself, how do you deal with that, and that it had some meaning. I'm still very ambivalent about these questions around the *Laissées*. For me there's more work to do on them. When I say there's a lot of work to do, I mean I would say that, okay, *Duchamp Effacé* is dated 1951-1960, when was the title given? Exactly? When was it shown for the first time? Was it shown only in the 1990s? How do we take the dates seriously, how do we deal with that? I still don't know exactly.

MF: I don't know if this is a good transition from what we're saying about the *Laissées*, I'm thinking also about the *Études* (1969 – 1973), that we can think about the *Laissées* like *morceaux*, like 'bits', literally.

EdC: Yes.

MF: It brings to mind a question that's coming to mind for me – within the possibilities in French – such as *une étude*, *une esquisse*, *un morceau* (translated as *study*, *sketch and bit*, or also as *part*. These were terms used in the academic tradition and thought of as stages toward a more achieved painting or *tableau*), that were mainly nineteenth century ways of saying it's not an achieved work; it's not a complete work.

EdC: Yes.

MF: And he uses '*tabula*' as a title for a series. And there seems to be a sense of how he uses this other French word 'dispositive' – I don't know if he used it himself, I've no idea, but there seems to be a sense of his thinking, that it's more towards the French idea of the 'dispositive' than the Anglo-Saxon idea of process. This distinction seems to me to be rather important. I'm wondering especially with this reprographic aspect that you're proposing, if this kind of distinction that is possible in French between '*peinture*' and '*tableau*' – if that was important in the sense that he seems to be very aware of different states of a painting?

EdC: Yes, yes, I understand. I don't know about that. I'm not sure he's interested in '*tableau*', he's really interested in '*peinture*'.

MF: But not *peinture-peinture*?

EdC: But not *peinture* with paint, it's painting not necessarily with paint. What interests him about painting is the fact that it's a transitive word – I mean in English – but in the sense that it would be in French even though it's not. What he wants to leave behind in 1958-59, is the idea that you have to deal with a picture in a sense that it's a table that you lay things on. He's interested in process but not in the English way, I mean in the Anglo-American way, you're right.

- MF: There's something that turns there, I'm thinking about Didi-Huberman's *L'Étoilement* (Didi-Huberman: 1998) where there's a lot of discussion about his mother's *tablier* (apron), a thing that bears traces, its modesty...
- EdC: I would really differentiate in French between '*modestie*' and '*humilité*'. In fact Hantaï is completely on the side of '*humilité*', which is not wanting to be above yourself, or something like that, so you're always on ground level and not higher than that. And at the same time you can aim very high. When you're *modeste*, you allow yourself in advance not to aim at anything.
- MF: Like in the way he talks about his family's relationship to music, his parent's relationship to it for example, there's a certain type of culture but it's not a privileged access?
- EdC: Exactly. And that's where I think his relationship with certain Christian aspects of his thoughts are really crucial. I mean, it can be a very silly way as well, I mean it can be addressed in a serial way, so you just end up reciting St John of the Cross or something. And I could quote St John of the Cross, because I do think it has to do with that.
- MF: A liturgical sense?
- EdC: No I'm thinking of this poem, *Of Falconary*, by St John of the Cross where you find these verses: 'and sinking fast oh fast, yet went so high, so high'. Which is deeply rooted in a certain rhetoric of Catholicism, it does exist in Christianity in general. Which is why I do think the fact that *Écriture Rose* is dealing with liturgy, and the Roman Catholic mass and texts, is really crucial. I don't know if it can be interpreted as a goodbye to Christianity or it can be interpreted on the contrary as a way to sum things up. But I think this aspect stays with him until the end.
- MF: There's an interesting thing with, for example, *Écriture rose* in the sense that, at the crossroads where he was standing then, especially in relationship to modesty and humility and also the sense of a *pauvreté*, there never seemed to be a relationship with Arte Povera that I detected?
- EdC: No he was only in Italy in 1948 and that's it, he never came back
- MF: He could have seen shows in Paris?
- EdC: I guess he could have seen shows; I don't know what he was seeing in Paris.
- MF: You can see where he could have gone, he could have gone in all sorts of directions. There is something of an artist like Tapies with *Écriture Rose* but he is an artist who is so remote from Hantaï.
- EdC: Exactly, completely, I agree. Just because he's much more contradictory than them, I guess. Maybe I could say that's where in some ways the silkscreens are a failure, that they are not contradictory enough. It's just keeping to one side of the question,

leaving out the other side. Maybe it's better with the digital works, I don't know, maybe more interesting at least.

MF: Do you think there's many works we haven't seen from those years? With the digital works – do we know what's there?

EdC: The digital, I think we know pretty much what there is.

MF: These came out of Le Fresnoy show?

EdC: Yes. The *Pliages à usage domestique*, there are many more, I don't know how many, but there were some which were hanging in the studio.

MF: I think this question of what's emerging now with Hantaï, with the audience that's emerging. For people who know the work well they believe that Hantaï is a crucial and really major artist who is not that well known outside France?

EdC: I know.

MF: Do you get the feeling that there's more people looking at the work?

EdC: Yes completely. At the same time, it was funny yesterday, there was a whole group of art centre directors in Rome, because there was this French – Italian conversation. Most of them hadn't seen the Pompidou show, because they just thought they knew Hantaï. And an incredible number of them, people I really respect a lot, were saying, looking at *Écriture rose*: 'it's really a great work'. They were saying 'it's really a great work; I had no idea Hantaï had been doing such great paintings'. I was saying to them that it's been hanging in the Pompidou forever, it was bought in 1976. So it was there at the opening of the Pompidou. Maybe there were a few years when it wasn't on view but it's been there forever. And it's interesting because people know it, but they still haven't seen it. And I guess that this contradictory aspect makes him much more relevant today than before.

MF: What's it been like bringing the show here?

EdC: You mean the response.

MF: Yes, for an Italian audience?

EdC: The press was very good. A lot of people got really interested. At the same time I have difficulties assessing the effect. I mean we can judge the effect of the Pompidou exhibition very simply, which is the rise in price of Hantaï's work. Basically the *Mariales* were going for five or six hundred thousand Euros. Works from that period, they are now going for about two and a half million. It's a literal effect of the show

MF: I heard that the Washington Museum bought one. So there's major American collections who have his work now? And of course there was the Kasmin show in New York some time ago, there was a lot of interest around that?

EdC: You can see that it's also coming with a will to re-write history in a more complex way. I mean you can see that happening with Martin Barré, which is actually going to be shown in the next exhibition at Villa Medici.

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